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CHAPTER VII

ECONOMY

The Domestic and Tribal Economy of the Aztec People

THE AZTEC SOCIAL SYSTEM provided a means by which people could exist harmoniously together in considerable numbers. The domestic and tribal economy of the Aztecs offered the food, shelter, tools and clothing to which man largely owes his dominant position on earth. The measure of a human society may be gauged by the relationship between the organization of the people themselves and their use of materials to build houses and equip them. The Aztecs' economy had the same basic simplicity as had their social organization; likewise it had the same flexibility in expanding to meet the needs of a growing population.[1]

Agriculture was the basis of Aztec life, and corn, *zea mays*, was the chief food plant. The cultivation of plants ensured a food supply near at hand, which was not subject to the fluctuations of game and thereby enabled man to take thought for the morrow. The clan system, as we have seen, recognized that the fruits of the land supported the tribe. Therefore, it was only natural that the tribe should own and control the land which supported its members.[2] (See Plate 38.)

The tribal council divided the land among the clans, and

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the leaders of each, in turn, apportioned its share among the heads of families justly and equitably. Sections were also reserved for the maintenance of the chief and the temple staff, for war supplies and the payment of tribute; these were worked communally, with some amount, no doubt, of slave labor. At the death of a tenant the land passed to his sons. If he died without issue the holding reverted to the clan for redivision, as was also the case if a tenant failed to cultivate his plot for a period of two years. Such a system could work equitably and profitably for all concerned so long as a society was relatively static and plenty of arable land was at hand. However, in the Valley of Mexico inequalities developed in the system.

The growing population of the Valley tribes used up all the available land, and families or clans had no way of adding to their farm holdings. A plot which produced ample supplies for a small family might yield a bare subsistence or less for a larger one. Normal variation in the richness of soil would result in similar injustices. Under such conditions the chiefs and priests who lived off the public lands would be far better off than the ordinary citizen whose holding, generation by generation, tended to diminish. Thus friction leading to foreign war and internal revolt was bound to result whenever a tribe could not expand its territorial limits to meet the needs of its population. The considerable migrations, like those of the Culhuas to Texcoco and Tenochtitlan or the Mixtec people to Texcoco years earlier, had their basis in a pressing economic necessity.[1]

The Tenochcas, who came late to the Valley, at a time when land was at a premium, had, we have seen, a difficult time in withstanding their hungry neighbors. Forced to re-

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311 578 achieved by the relatively unlimited possibilities of *chinampa* agriculture.

729 The Tenochcas supplemented their land hunger by an-
728 other means. In conquered territories successful warriors
471 received grants of land which were worked by members of the defeated tribe. Small colonies sometimes lived off this
[428] land to guard against revolt in the subjugated area. Such property passed from father to son, but if there were no heir it reverted to the tribal authority, not the clan in which the tenant had membership. Other such land must have been held for the benefit of the religious organization. Thus the central authority of Tenochtitlan, and presumably Texcoco as well, held considerable property to support the elaborate pomp of Church and State without straining the resources of the tribesmen. The relative fluidity of such real estate gave the tribal authority a wherewithal to adjust inequalities and dissatisfactions among the more ambitious tribal members. Naturally, as the Aztec peoples were less highly developed socially than ourselves, they did not attain our own elaborate system of rewards and adjustments by means of federal, state and municipal appointments.*

651 A powerful Aztec tribe had another source of support: tribute. The levies often consisted of foodstuffs and raw materials, both native and foreign to the Valley, and also included warriors' and priests' costumes, mantles, pottery and other articles of craftsmanship. Distributed throughout the community these goods enriched both communal enterprise and private convenience.* (See Plates 62, bottom right; 64.)

436 Manufacture and trade were beginning to play an im-
438 portant part in Aztec economy, although not to the extent
32 of societies which have developed media of exchange, like

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court. The house walls had stone bases and, according to the wealth or taste of the owner, were finished in stone or adobe. The roof was constructed by covering crossbeams with small poles tightly fitted together and spreading a layer of lime plaster over the whole. As there were no windows, the houses had to be shallow. To admit light and air the buildings were usually two rooms deep and prolonged according to taste and wealth. The back room, which contained a hearth for cooking, was completely enclosed save for the door to the outer chamber which was left largely open on the patio side, columns or short wing walls supporting the rafters. Two-story houses probably did not exist before the Conquest, but there are cases where, to have light and circulation of air, a rear court with its surrounding rooms was elevated on a platform to the height of the roofs of the rooms around the patio in front.[24] (See Plate 41.)

Recent excavations in the palace of the chief of Chicohuahtla, a fief of Texcoco, revealed interesting data on the growth of a chiefly establishment. This palace was continually being rebuilt and expanded to meet the demands of a growing population and richer economy. Patios were arranged at different levels, according to the plan described above. The earliest rooms had the congested quality of a Teotihuacan plan, but the later chambers were more spacious and open to sun and air. Each renovation called for more space, so that allowing a family of five to each hearth, the entourage of the chief more than trebled in a century and a quarter.[25] (See Plate 43.)

The plan of an Aztec town tended to have a rectangular form, since the division of the land among the clans usually followed a more or less orderly rectilinear pattern. A central